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What Planets Do TPLF's Leaders Inhabit?

Is the Agreement on the cessation of hostilities enough to bring out the champagne from the cooler? Is there a reason for celebration? Under ordinary circumstances an agreement to stop shooting should be considered the first step towards a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Unfortunately, we are dealing with the TPLF, masters of stalling tactics and who would try anything to get an unfair advantage.

The Agreement is supposed to be followed by the placement of a UN peacekeeping force along the entire joint border to be followed by Ethiopia's withdrawal of its forces to the May 6 line and, soon, thereafter, negotiations leading to demarcation and a permanent ceasefire would begin. This is the expectation. But don't hold your breath. The TPLF will use every chip in its exhaustible bag of tricks to frustrate an orderly process leading to demarcation and continue to make impossible demands of Eritrea to buy time until the OAU has a more malleable chair in the mold of a Campoare of Burkina Faso.

The outline of TPLF's new demands was in evidence in the days following the signing of the Agreement in Algiers. While Prime Minister Meles was telling diplomats and the media that Ethiopia was committed to the OAU peace package, his Foreign Minister continued the proximity talks with a new list of demands: new preconditions designed to render the peacepackage null and void. Before any discussion on the UN peace keeping force, as called for in the Agreement, and the return to the May 6 line, Seyoum Mesfin insisted that the OAU consider additional issues of interest to Ethiopia: the rights of Tigreans in Eritrea, compensation on Zalambessa, substituting demarcation with arbitration as an ultimate goal of the peace negotiation and putting a limit on Eritrea's military capability. If meant to represent serious negotiating positions, the Foreign Minister's declarations are nothing short of terms of surrender. But Ethiopia is in no position to demand terms of surrender since the Ethiopian army failed to achieve its principal objective—the military oc-

cupation of Eritrea.

The TPLF signed the Agreement for two reasons: it understood clearly that militarily it could not achieve its objectives and pressure from the donor community made continuing the war at its current level untenable. The donor community exerted intensive pressure on Ethiopia to sign the Agreement at the risk of losing more development assistance. But agreeing to stop the war for now had very little to do with agreeing to sign a peace treaty. All it would take for Ethiopia to resume the war is for some "provocation" from Eritrea, with only Ethiopia to decide if a provocation had taken place.

As far as the TPLF is concerned, the Agreement should be seen for what it is: a time to regroup and a time to reload for the next offensive because the invasion's primary objective, the subjugation of Eritrea, was thwarted in the open furnace of the Bure front and the forbidding escarpments of Adi Quala. The TPLF won a few battles but has lost the war, the war of conquest. Eritrea has lost a few battles but has won the war in that it has thwarted the assault on its sovereignty. Winning or losing a war is relative: it all depends on the initial objectives. A single battle or two should not be confused with the course of the war. One can lose battles, but may still win the war. By staying intact and by denying Assab to Ethiopian forces, Eritrea has won a strategic victory.

After one month of sustained assault in the largest war anywhere in the world, Ethiopia achieved none of its objectives. The Eritrean army is still intact and defending its land, notwithstanding Prime Minister Meles' boast that Eritrea lost 60 percent of its capacity. The Eritrean government is still there, and at least for now, more popular than ever. The attempt to take Assab was a fiasco for Ethiopia's military. How can the TPLF reconcile the military debacle in Assab with its claim that Ethiopia's valiant forces "incapacitated the fighting capacity of the Eritrean army." Either one has to acknowledge that an incapacitated Eritrean army was more than enough for Ethiopia's "valiant" forces, or one has to simply accept the fact that Ethiopia's military might is an empty slogan. Why Meles and his comrades boast so much about an under performing army is anyone's guess.

The TPLF has bragged a lot about the spectacular performance of the Ethiopian army. An army that distinguishes itself through indiscriminate looting is not an army to be proud of. How can it be when elements of the Ethiopian army went after personal effects with a vengeance, not sparing baby clothes, panties, mattresses, blankets, pots and pans? Ethiopia's leaders also could not say enough about the field performance of their army. The claim is that Eritrea's army is no longer a threat to Ethiopia's security. But if the claim is true why did the Ethiopian government insist in the placement of an international peace keeping force, or a "security zone", inside Eritrea?

Or how can Addis Ababa or Mekele (take your pick) explain the latest trial balloon that Eritrea's armed forces be reduced in size and fighting capability to provide Ethiopia with a security guarantee? This proposal is not a figment of our imagination. It was actually put forward by Ethiopia's Foreign Minister Seyoum Mesfin in Algiers a few days ago, after Ethiopia signed the Agreement on the cessation of hostilities. Boasting of military prowess one minute, and shortly thereafter asking for international protection from Eritrea's "vanquished" army do not add up. But then one has to know that TPLF's leaders live in a world of their own.

That Prime Minister Meles putting everything he had on the campaign to take Assab after his government announced that it accepted the Agreement in principle is in line with Meles record of never keeping his word. Taking advantage of Eritrea's unilateral withdrawal to the 37 km in the Bure front in compliance with the OAU's request, Meles sent what amounted to a suicide mission to seize Assab. Tens of thousands were hurled into the open furnace that is the Bure front, and this after Prime Minister Meles solemnly told the international community that Ethiopia had no interest in indisputably Eritrean territory. Of course he went back on his word, as he often did during the past two years.

One day Ethiopia says that it has accepted the Agreement in 'principle' and the next thing we know its marauding army is let loose on a mad land grab in western Eritrea. Along the way the army left a trail of destruction, looting, rape, and kidnapping in the old Abyssinian tradition, sent on a similar mission of conquest. Not surprising for a gang that's totally bereft of any ennobling principles. And the world expects the TPLF to abide by the Agreement to cease hostilities? If one closely follows TPLF's logic, or illogic, as is often the case, a resumption of the war under the flimsiest of excuses is inevitable. All it will take is a "provocation." By the TPLF's definition, a provocation is whatever the TPLF says it is. But its real meaning is clear: a manufactured excuse, a pretext for more war. Why more war? Because that's the only way the TPLF can justify its existence.

One does not know what to make out of Ethiopias leaders. A few days ago, Ethiopia's Parliament passed a resolution expressing grave concern about human rights violations of Ethiopians in Eritrea. An Ethiopian governmental unit complaining of a human rights violation is a travesty. The masters of deportation, extrajudicial killings and practitioners of kangaroo court justice have no moral standing to lecture anyone on anything remotely approaching to human rights. But lecture they do. The human rights of Ethiopians in Eritrea is protected by law, regardless of "the color of their eyes." One has to assume, however, that the resolution is a red herring. It is, one suspects, an attempt to induce a provocation, a pretext, to justify military action to nullify

the Agreement. The TPLF seems to be saying either give our people special rights to live and work in Eritrea, or, Ethiopia, Africa's master deporter, will consider a failure to do so nothing short of a provocation. Its a blackmail in the making. The minority controlled government refused to take more than 500 of the 4000 Tigrayans who requested voluntary repatriation. The same government has prevented 15,000 Eritreans who applied for voluntary repatriation to their homes in Eritrea. They have been refused permission to leave. The TPLF won't accept its own people who wish to return home, and won't permit Eritreans in Ethiopia to leave. As we have been saying all along, TPLF's leaders are impossible to fathom. They cannot be of this planet as the rest of us.. They must reside elsewhere.

To understand what the TPLF would do tomorrow one has to read *Walta,* the TPLF's news agency. As is the case often the articles appear under byline of individuals, real or imagined. If they are real people they appear to have an uncanny ability to predict future government positions. And even if they are not real people, what they say represents what the government of Ethiopia is thinking. For people who are familiar with how the TPLF operates, whatever is written in *Walta* is the government's position, although cloaked with a clumsy veneer of deniability if the world rejects it because of the position's outrageousness. For example take a recent article in Walta by one Haile Selassie Girmay.

Haile Selassie Girmay, and by extension the TPLF, appear to renege, on the thrust on the OAU proposal with a precondition, introducing an impossible demand to the OAU process: that a condemnation of Eritrea as an aggressor must precede the consideration of the OAU peace package. What does the public condemnation imply? Eritrea must "own up the responsibilities of its actions," says Haile Selassie. In plain language, Eritrea must pay for "all the blood that (sic) Ethiopian blood split (sic) lives lost, properties destroyed, and other incalculable non-material losses incurred..." Not only does the TPLF want an admission of guilt, but also full restitution. This, says the TPLF through Haile Selassie, is Ethiopia's demand for rock bottom justice. A demand for an apology before the source of the conflict has been determined is in keeping with TPLF's concept of justice: that one is guilty of an offence unless proven otherwise.

Determination of guilt and who should pay restitution bring tricky questions that the TPLF has not thought through carefully. Never mind that the OAU peace proposal does not assign blame for who started the war. All the OAU has said is that the incident should be investigated. The TPLF wants a guilty verdict before the initiation of the investigation. This is not surprising. In the TPLF's world an Eritrean is guilty unless proven otherwise by a TPLF court, a Kangaroo court judgment so characteristic of courts in Tigray. Still

we can safely say this: if restitution has to be paid for verifiable war damages, it's a judgment Eritrea could live with.

Let us start with the May 12 invasion and its consequences. If the "rejection of the use of force as a means of imposing solutions to disputes," as the OAU peace package has mandated means anything, by Haile Selassie's logic, Ethiopia's incursion deep into Eritrean territory and the destruction, population displacement and pillaging by its marauding soldiers must be the Ethiopian state's responsibility. Logic has to stand on its head for Ethiopia to claim restitution for the tens of thousands of Ethiopian soldiers who perished in the ill-fated attempt to subjugate Eritrea, or for the hundreds of thousands of their families who have now lost their principal breadwinners. By what logic is it Eritrea's fault that the attackers have been stopped cold in their tracks and should demand restitution for their ill deeds? Is it Eritrea's fault that thousands have lost their lives because the TPLF wanted to install a puppet regime in Asmara or seize Assab? If anyone has to pay restitution for the attack on Eritrea's sovereignty, is there any doubt who that should be? Someone will pay, should pay, for the massive destruction, looting and pillaging of occupied Eritrean towns and villages. Unless Ethiopia's leaders are living in another planet, away from the rest of us, their army of invasion deserves no restitution from the potential victim and asking for one will expose them to what they are: the world's looniest leaders.

But if restitution has to be asked for real acts of aggression, then it's Eritreans who have the legal standing to make such a request. The flip side of the 30-year war of Eritrean independence is 30-year war of Ethiopian aggression against Eritreans, an aggression that Prime Minister Meles has conceded in his famous "don't scratch your wounds" speech in Asmara in 1993. If Haile Selassie Girmay thinks consistency has any value, he would support Eritrea's demand for restitution from Ethiopia for 30 years of aggression. To this he must also add the economic pillage of Eritrea of the fifties and sixties, by none other than Emperor Haile Selassie. Also to the bill we must add the economic and social cost the 70,000 victims of Ethiopian deportation in Eritrea have suffered. If Eritreans were required to pay up before a competent body has ascertained guilt or innocence, would it not be fair to ask Ethiopia to pay for its 50 years of destruction and looting of Eritrea. Eritreans would gladly gild the shantytown of Zalambessa in exchange for full reparations for 50 years of economic pillage, war and destruction of Eritrea by successive Ethiopian rulers. It's only fair that the TPLF be asked to pay up because by every imaginable criterion its leaders are the rightful heir to the Emperor and the Derg's Eritrea policy. What more compelling evidence does one need to produce than the failed march to Asmara and the failed seizure of Assab to show that the TPLF has tried to succeed where the Emperor and the Derg failed?

Whether the Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities would lead to a permanent peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia is anybody's guess. If we go by TPLF's record on prior negotiations and agreements, there is not much hope. The TPLF would do everything at its disposal to frustrate the negotiation. It would try its best to avoid demarcation on the basis of colonial treaties, because as one of its advisers, Herman Cohen said, Ethiopia would lose a judgment rendered by neutral bodies. This explains why Foreign Minister Seyoum Mesfin demanded that the OAU scrap demarcation in lieu of arbitration, from the peace package. The demand was made after Ethiopia accepted the Agreements in Algiers and promised that it was committed to implementing the OAU peace package in its totality. While Prime Minister Meles was promising to uphold the OAU peace package, his Foreign Minister was inserting new demands to obstruct the implementation of the peace package. Indeed TPLF's leaders speak in forked tongues. These are the same people who said they had no interest in occupying Eritrean territory, but then went ahead and did just that. They said they were withdrawing from western Eritrea, and then decided to stay put. Does anyone know what planet these leaders inhabit? This writer does not know. Does anyone?

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